

CCC INTERVIEW WITH LEON COOPER

Date: June 25, 2002

Location: Iowa City

Interviewer: Larry Wilson

DNR: What CCC camps were you assigned too?

Leon: Hampton, Iowa.

DNR: How long were you in the CCC's?

Leon: Six months.

DNR: Do you remember the year?

Leon: I graduated from high school in 1937. It was '38 or '39.

DNR: Where is your hometown?

Leon: Kensett, Iowa.

DNR: How old were you when you joined the CCC's?

Leon: I was born in 1918. I was 20 or 21.

DNR: What did you do before you joined the CCC's?

Leon: You couldn't buy a job in those years. I worked a little on the farm. I did some work on WPA. I help support my sister and mother. My parents were divorced. My dad wouldn't support us. I was ten and my sister was six when they divorced.

DNR: You did the WPA before you joined the CCC?

Leon: Yes. My mother worked WPA too. Everybody was poor. There weren't any rich people. The pay scale at the 3C's was \$5. \$25 went home.

DNR: How did you spend your money?

Leon: Candy. We had a rec hall but it didn't amount to much. We had a PX and I smoked at that time. I quit in 1966. Cold turkey.

DNR: What time of the year did you go in?

Leon: In the fall. I signed up in Northwood or Kensett. It was the first time I was away from home. It was unpleasant to be away. There were a lot of lonely people there. I knew one guy, he would eat so fast he would throw up and start eating again. We slept in barracks at the fairgrounds. The camps were handled by the army. You had army clothes. I was sent to the camp and then you were on your own. We lived forty miles from the camp. If we wanted to go home on a weekend we would hitchhike or would hop a freight. I remember this other fellow and I were on a freight car. We hopped into a coal car and expected to stop in Manly. We got in that sucker. It was a cold night and it started raining. That train highballed through Manly, Kensett, Northwood and we didn't stop until we got to Minnesota.

DNR: How did you get assigned to the barracks?

Leon: I don't remember. We had army cots. We had army quilts. You'd have to make your bed. You would wake up in the morning with snow on your bed. You had one pot bellied stove and no plumbing. The barracks were made with wood and covered with steel.

DNR: Did you take any personal items with you to camp?

Leon: I don't remember. They supplied you with everything.

DNR: Do you remember any of the guys you were with in the barracks?

Leon: Not by name.

DNR: Did everyone get along in the barracks?

Leon: We had one Mexican who people would pick on. I remember him drawing a knife on someone. I befriended this fella.

DNR: What was the food like in the mess hall?

Leon: It was better than what we had at home. We got three meals a day. I was pleased. I can't remember anything that was offensive.

DNR: Who did the cooking?

Leon: We had a mess sergeant. We had military cooks. The sergeant was an army man. We had KPs from the CCC boys.

DNR: Were there special holiday meals?

Leon: I don't remember.

DNR: What days did you have off?

Leon: Saturdays and Sundays.

DNR: Did you have to get a pass?

Leon: Yes.

DNR: Was the Sabbath observed on Sundays?

Leon: No.

DNR: Were there sport activities?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did you have any personal conflicts?

Leon: No.

DNR: Do you remember the camp number?

Leon: I don't remember. We built the dam at Beeds Lake.

DNR: Beeds Lake State Park. What did you do up there?

Leon: We are three miles from camp. We rode state trucks to work. We did a lot of pick axe work. I assume we were in the lodge area. We were pick axing the ground. We had some masonry work. It was winter.

DNR: Were there any other minorities?

Leon: I think there were a few Americans of African descent.

DNR: Were there any educational or vocational opportunities?

Leon: (no response)

DNR: Do you remember any of the names of the people you worked with?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did you stay in touch with your co-workers?

Leon: No.

DNR: What did you do after you left the CCC's?

Leon: I was rejected from the army because I had flat feet. So I got a defense related job with the railroad repairing box cars for five years. Rain or shine. Then we went to Iowa City. We had a little girl. I got a home construction job. I worked for him 28 years. We did remodeling and swimming pools. His name was M.D. McCreedy. He did a lot of work for the university. His philosophy was you get paid what your worth. He paid me more than union scale. His three sons were working with him. His oldest son took over the business. It changed. I worked for the son for ten years. I asked for a raise and it was refused. I started on my own. I just did repair jobs. I have three girls and a boy. The boy works for the university as a vet for husbandry. On July 4, we will be married 61 years.

DNR: Did you pick up any special skills in the CCC's?

Leon: No.

DNR: What did you learn from the CCC's?

Leon: I learned a work ethic. Responsibility.

DNR: Did you ever get hurt?

Leon: No.

DNR: Was anyone ever hurt?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did they have a doctor available?

Leon: Yes.

DNR: Do you recall any diseases in camp?

Leon: No.

DNR: Was there a rodent or insect problem?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did you ever do work outside the camp?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did you have any contacts with the community?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did you have any female contacts?

Leon: No.

DNR: Did you or others have any problems with the local boys?

Leon: No.

DNR: What was the view of the camp from the community's perspective?

Leon: A good viewpoint.

DNR: What was the most memorable experience?

Leon: Getting stuck in the coal car.

END OF TRANSCRIPT – SAM J. HAIM – SCRIBE

Some grammatical changes and corrections were made by Larry Wilson after talking with Leon Cooper on August 8, 2005.